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SUBJECT: NEW COUNTERNARCOTICS SUCCESSES

REF: HANOI 01885

1. (U) SUMMARY. A prominent drug trial in Hanoi concluded on August 29 with a variety of harsh punishments, including four death sentences. According to government prosecutors, this was an exceptionally serious case, involving many people, in a drug-trafficking ring between Lai Chau province and Hanoi. Ho Chi Minh City police separately undertook what they labeled Vietnam's largest-ever drug bust, arresting suspects believed responsible for smuggling in excess of 462 kilograms of heroin since the beginning of the year. These cases are characteristic of the higher tempo of drug operations this year. END SUMMARY.

HANOI, INCREASINGLY A HOTSPOT

2. (U) According to press reports, during the first half of 2003, Hanoi drug law enforcement forces investigated 916 cases involving 1,258 people, accounting for 13 percent of cases nationwide. Deputy Director of Hanoi Police, Senior Colonel Do Kim Tuyen, publicly pointed to three factors that led to the increase in arrests: (1) Effective use of informants; (2) Elevated priority of drug cases and exhortation of counternarcotics officers to do more and be accountable for results; and (3) An accelerated reward system (financial and professional) for counternarcotics officers. According to Bui Xuan Hieu, Head of the International Cooperation and Project Management Division of the Standing Office for Drugs Control of Vietnam (SODC), Vietnam in general and Hanoi in particular have witnessed an increase in investigations, arrests, and prosecutions in 2003; this up curve is expected to continue for the remainder of the year.

HANOI TRIAL

3. (U) Following a late 2000 arrest of Pham Van Thanh, police were able to go on to arrest "ringleader" Chu Van Hieu and other accomplices in early 2002. A total of 20 defendants stood trial in Hanoi in late August 2003. The Hanoi People's Court handed down four death sentences, seven life imprisonments, two prison sentences of 16 years and 7 years -- for Deputy Chief of the Hanoi's Hoan Kiem District Counternarcotics Office Nguyen Manh Hung and Officer Nguyen Viet Ha of the same office -- as well as 12 months (suspended) for a prison superintendent, and various other long prison sentences. The defendants were found guilty of trafficking about 13 kilograms of heroin and 307 kilograms of opium as well as taking US\$32,000 in bribes. According to Supreme People's Procuracy officials (government prosecutors), this is an "exceptionally serious" case with many people involved in trafficking drugs through Lai Chau province (on the Laos-China border) and on to Hanoi for consumption.

LONG AN CASE

4. (U) The Long An Provincial People's Court closed a major case also on August 29. Twenty-nine defendants were convicted of trafficking 35 kilograms of heroin and carrying illegally US\$ 264,200 across the border. Penalties included five death sentences and assorted long prison sentences.

RECORD BUST IN HO CHI MINH CITY

5. (U) According to SDOC section head Hieu, Ho Chi Minh City Counternarcotics Police recently encountered what is believed to be Vietnam's biggest-ever bust. Police arrested eight people on charges of smuggling a record amount of 462 kilograms of heroin since early this year. According to Ho Chi Minh City Counternarcotics Police, the eight traffickers included the Chief of Nghe An province's Tuong Duong

District Counternarcotics Police. The group smuggled the heroin from Laos through Nghe An onto southern provinces for consumption. The police suspect the traffickers are linked with other organized criminal syndicates in Asia. The case is now undergoing further investigation.

16. (U) Comment: These recent cases are remarkable by Vietnamese standards due to their scale, as well as the unfortunate but not surprising involvement of counternarcotics officials. The publicity given to the cases reflects the GVN's awareness that corruption is as much of a problem here as narcotics trafficking, as well as its determination to demonstrate success on both fronts to the public. In a perfect world, this increased priority would be reflected in flexibility in the GVN's attitude towards cooperation with the USG on drug issues. Embassy, especially DEAN Hanoi Country Office, will use these events as opportunities to raise the cooperation issue again with MPS and other GVN agencies.
BURGHARDT